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SUBJECT: What does Climate Change Mean for Belgium?

Ref: 06 Brussels 1637

¶1. (U) Introduction and Summary. Publication of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report has raised the profile of the issue in Belgium and given it a place in pre-election debate. Belgium has a mixed record on environmental policy (noted reftel), and its complex federal structure that devolves much environmental responsibility to the regions slows decision making. The clear political and public consensus that "something needs to be done" on global warming should help Belgium respond, however, even though the EU Commission noted in January that Belgium is lagging in achieving its Kyoto obligations. Government measures to date have focused on incentives rather than fines or compulsory limits to CO2 emissions. Belgian dedication to the ecological cause will be tested once EU-mandated restrictions and costs begin to bite. End Summary.

The Possible Impact

¶2. (U) With the international scientific consensus agreed that climate change is real and lasting, Belgians are now taking the issue more seriously. Scientists, political leadership and the public are trying to determine what the impact is likely to be on Belgium. While the Kyoto protocol obligations have engaged Belgian government planners for five years, intense media coverage of an abnormally warm Belgian winter and Al Gore's movie "An Inconvenient Truth" have pushed the issue to the forefront of Belgian public attention.

¶3. (U) Climatologists are still considering the impact of global warming on Belgium. Given that Belgium has, after the Netherlands, one of the lowest average elevations (300 meters) of any Western European country, a rise of 0.8 meters or more in average sea level (depending on scientific assumptions) in coming decades could devastate Belgium's coastline and economy. 63,000 hectares (243 square miles) of land could be lost if sea levels rise as foreseen, according to a 2004 study. The principal ports of Antwerp, Zeebrugge, Oostende and Ghent would need revamping, and property values in these cities and along the entire North Sea coast could plummet. This would also represent a decapitalization of the equity many Belgians hold, with consequences throughout the economy. While Belgium's lynchpin commercial role in Europe's transportation logistics may not be endangered, the costs of maintaining facilities in the face of harsher hurricanes, higher storm surges and greater shore erosion could be significant.

¶4. (U) While few Belgian residents would complain about a sunnier climate, global warming will be a double-edged

sword. The Royal Meteorological Institute spokesman says that climate change is already having an impact on Belgium's Ardennes piedmont region. From 1948-1988, the region averaged 48 snowy winter days per year; from 1989 to 2006 the average was only 36 snowy days. This loss of snow days of 40 percent has contributed to a decline in cross-country skiing and other winter sports, and their associated tourism revenues. The Institute expects the number of snow days to fall further to 50 percent over the next 25 years. Declining snowfall also means declining water run-off in springtime, which may change the character and cultivation of Belgian farmland.

15. (U) According to a 2004 study of Europe funded by Greenpeace, climate change could mean 2.4 to 6.6 degree warmer summers in Belgium by 2100. Precipitation is expected to rise in the winter, but decline significantly in the summer, possibly over 40 percent. Should a hotter average summer, such as in 2006, become the norm, the agricultural crop mix would have to change; one agronomist says that Belgium might become better for growing wheat than for endive and vegetables. While agriculture accounts for less than 2 percent of GDP, major changes in vegetable crop supplies could push up food costs and inflation. A rise in average temperatures means many species of fresh-water fish and long-lived deciduous trees (oak, beech, poplar) could be threatened if they were unable to adapt to the changed environment.

The Public Perception

16. (U) An IPSOS poll of 1,027 Belgians showed that 83 percent of them are concerned about climate change.

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Francophone and older Belgians are more concerned than Flemish speakers and younger Belgians. To address the problem, 78 percent respond that Belgium should use "green technologies," 76 percent say they would rely on less polluting modes of transportation, and 64% want to reduce packaging waste. When questioned as to what measures they personally take at present, eight out of ten respondents claim they recycle household garbage, and three out of four say they use energy-saving light bulbs. Nonetheless, only 16 percent actually use any "green technology" and few are willing to spend more to curb climate change.

Government Response

17. (U) Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt reacted to the Intergovernmental Climate Change Report by calling for a "Kyoto-plus" plan. Saying that Kyoto was not enough to save the planet, Verhofstadt claimed we have to "grit our teeth" and in collaboration with the regional governments, hammer out a plan to go beyond Kyoto, further limiting pollution and CO2 emissions. He praised Belgian industry as already "among the 10 percent most energy efficient in the world," and called for greater efforts by households to change behavior and cut heating and lighting use.

18. (U) Verhofstadt's plan was no surprise considering EU pressure. On January 17, the European Commission asked Belgium to reduce the number of emissions permits it granted by 7.6 percent (equivalent to 4.8 million tons of CO2) in order to achieve its Kyoto targets of a 7.5 percent reduction in CO2 emissions by 2012 compared to the 1990 reference year level. The Belgian goal is 135.8 million tons annually, and as of 2004 the country was still above its target. According to the EC, nearly 360 heavy industries and energy companies in Belgium should be permitted only 58.5 million tons in emissions permits annually, rather than the 63.3 million tons the government proposed to issue. The Commission also faulted Belgium for being too quick to buy emission rights abroad.

¶9. (U) Among the regions the call for further emission cuts is not welcome. Walloon Environment Minister Benoit Lutgen claims his region already took a disproportionate share of cuts in the regional allocations to meet Kyoto, and that commercial industry took on most of the effort, compared to consumers and the transportation sector. The Union of Walloon Enterprises environment director claims firms in the south are not getting the credit they deserve for cuts already made in previous years. A similar complaint was voiced by ExxonMobil in the port of Antwerp. A Walloon electricity supplier expressed the belief that further emissions cuts will result in lower energy production and higher prices. Flemish Environment Minister Kris Peeters also expressed disappointment at the Commission decision, and said Flemish industry had already reached the limit of possible emissions cuts. VOKA, the Flemish Employers Association, said further cuts would cost 300 million euros and involve cutting jobs.

Push Comes to Shove

¶10. (SBU) Belgian measures to reduce CO2 emissions until now have been largely administrative and jaw-boning: distributing allocations to underscore the value of CO2 emissions, and urging manufacturers and energy distributors to curb pollution without imposing specific penalties. On the consumer side, Belgian tax law has been larded with incentives to households to renovate heating and insulation systems (up to 2600 euros tax credit for 2007), and to buy hybrid low-pollution cars (up to 4270 euros tax credit depending on the model). It is not clear how Verhofstadt's "Kyoto-plus" plan - nor the eventual coalition compromise that will have to be hammered out - will distribute the pain among industry, the transport sector, and consumers. Measures that would entail actual costs with an impact on business bottom lines and consumer pocketbooks will inevitably highlight differences among political parties in the run-up to federal elections June 10. How heavily voters will weight environmental platforms in choosing parliamentarians remains to be seen.

¶11. (SBU) Among the costly and thorny issues Belgium must address is the future role of nuclear energy ? until now Belgium's savior in curbing CO2 emissions. The issue is more and more openly debated but still is an orphan to most of the political parties. The nuclear power issue in the election campaign will be covered septel.

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